

I'm going to speak about the effect of the Soviet Jewry movement in developing Jewish identity among American Jews.

On a cold December night back in 1974 in Moscow, my friend Morey Schapira and I set out for the home of a key refusenik, Vladimir Slepak. His building on Gorky Street wasn't that hard to find. A statue of Yuri the Long Arm conveniently pointed the way.

We'd been in the Slepak's home the night before, meeting with refusenik leaders, delivering material assistance and Jewish items. We'd discussed the work of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and that even at that point, 10 years since the formation of the American Soviet Jewry movement, that we were proud of the meaningful change the movement was making in the lives of so many young North American Jews.

We never made it into Slepak's apartment for the second meeting. Three cars full of KGB agents moved along beside us as we walked into the Slepak building's courtyard. The intimidation worked. Not wanting these thugs following us into the apartment, we zipped out of the courtyard, jumped into the metro and kept riding around. We returned at midnight to Slepak. "Where were you?" he demanded. We stammered about the KGB. "We're not afraid," Volodya said, "why should you be?"

On a symbolic level, Yuri the Long Arm was not only pointing to the Slepaks, but to the long road of reconnection of many Soviet Jews to their Jewish heritage – and to our parallel road in America.

In the early 1960s, when Judaism in the USSR was still in lockdown despite some de-Stalinization, we then-young American Jews were not very publicly expressive about our identity. Israel was still remote. Though the Eichmann trial there was news, most Holocaust survivors concentrated on rebuilding, not rehashing, their lives. But the pure, burning idealism of the early American civil rights movement excited our sense of moral justice

As the first stirrings of Jewish re-identity occurred in Latvia and Lithuania, several of us who were involved in civil rights discovered Moshe Decter's groundbreaking "Foreign Affairs" article on the plight of Soviet Jews, and read news reports of the Kremlin's bans on Passover matzah. Here was an opportunity to demand civil rights for our own people. Under the leadership of Jacob Birnbaum, we called a meeting at Columbia University. We resolved to demonstrate four days later, on May Day, at the Soviet UN Mission 10 blocks from here. That day, the student movement for Soviet Jewry burst onto the public scene with 1000 students marching, not because our brilliant organizing, but because our "pintele yid", our Jewish souls, had found a mode of expression.

The symbols of our student movement were overtly Jewish – the clarion call of massed shofars, matzahs held high, a giant 10-foot Chanukah menorah we carried on our shoulders. Our close friend Shlomo Carlebach taught us his new song, "Am Yisrael Chai" after we marched behind rabbis holding Torah scrolls to the UN. Am Yisrael Chai infiltrated into the USSR, and as young Jews danced to it on Simchat Torah in front of some of the few synagogues, we were inspired to dance to it here, too. In just six Hebrew words, Am yisrael chai, od oveinu chai – the people of Israel live, our heavenly Father lives, Reb Shlomo expanded and deepened our neshamot, our souls.

The leadership of Rabbi A.J. Heschel from JTS and young rabbis from Yeshiva University, such as Shlomo Riskin, Avi Weiss, Yitz Greenberg and Charles Sheer, were crucial in developing our student Soviet Jewry movement and Jewish identities. They not only physically led us, but they taught us. They were the exemplars of not just yearning for the redemption of our brethren, but working for it, day by day.

Jewish identity as a replay of Jewish history now came to the fore. Elie Wiesel published his searing book, "The Jews of Silence" in 1966, and Arthur Morse published "While Six Million Died" in 1968. Both pointed an accusing finger – Morse, at the American Jewish community for its mostly silence during the Shoah, and Wiesel, for free world Jewry's continued silence while the USSR's Jews faced spiritual genocide. Young Jews vowed they would not be a silent generation, and threw the accusation, strengthened by the anti-Establishment passion of the anti-Vietnam war movement, against our elders.

American Jews, especially, our younger generation, sought new means of expression, from Rabbi Riskin's groundbreaking outreach to chavurot. And in the middle of it, along with the study and prayer, was concrete social action, including the nascent Soviet Jewry movement.

And, then, living history. In the face of strong Kremlin backing of Arab regimes, tiny Israel soundly defeated her enemies in the Six Day War. The miraculous victory inflamed Jewish pride on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Israel seemed much nearer to us. Young American Jews thought of aliyah. The voices of Boris Kochubiyevsky of Kiev and the 18 Georgian Jewish families, demanding their right to live in their Jewish homeland, were heard in the West. And the eloquent lone voices turned into a torrent of passionate appeals.

We came to feel the pain and desperation of our Russian brothers and sisters, especially at the time of the Leningrad hijack trial, when a group of Jews who tried to steal a Soviet plane to freedom faced death and long sentences. With great effort, we in the West increased phone contact with refuseniks and families of assirei tzion, prisoners for Zion. There grew a slowly increasing ability to visit refuseniks. They ranged from the casual to those briefed and trained to observe closely and teach.

For many visitors, their experiences were utterly life-changing, leading to deep involvement in Soviet Jewry advocacy, their own Jewish literacy, and commitment to Israel. When Stuart and Enid Wurtman decided to make aliyah as a result of their experiences and give up comfortable lives in Philadelphia, they told me that if their refusenik friends risked all to apply to emigrate to Israel, how could they not go as well. We at SSSJ would say that we probably had a higher rate of young men and women inspired to go on aliyah than most of the Zionist youth movements. Many of the activists of the non-Establishment Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, and the volunteers of Jewish federations' Soviet Jewry committees saw their lives as a duality, linked inextricably with the refuseniks and prisoners for whom they cared so deeply.

The underground network of Jewish classes and self-support groups waxed and waned, punctuated by trials of refuseniks and teachers, like Sharansky and Begun. Here, our growing public Jewish self-assurance allowed us to press demands for intervention on our own governments through Congressional lobbying and public rallies. The two most notable was the Jackson-Vanik Amendment

which linked American trade credits to the Kremlin with freer emigration, and 13 years later the huge December 1987 Washington rally.

Soviet Jewry advocacy became part of the American Jewish life cycle. You twinned your bar and bat mitzvah with a Soviet Jewish refusenik child. You might go on an annual high school or college Soviet Jewry lobby to Washington, attend a Soviet Jewry freedom seder, march in the annual New York Solidarity Day parade and rally, light Soviet Jewry freedom Chanukah candles. I'll never forget the young couple who, on their wedding day, visited Sylva Zalmanson as she hunger struck at the Isaiah Wall at the UN for her husband Edward Kuznetsov, imprisoned in the gulag.

American Jews entered into a second generation of identification with Soviet Jewry. Those who marched with us in the 1960s two decades later still marched , but together with their husbands and wives and children.

When Soviet Jews began arriving in the US, not just Israel, we were confronted with another challenge to our identities. If we wanted these Jews, with virtually no prior Jewish education, to go to shul be involved in the Jewish community, or just go to Israel, then what were we doing on Shabbat, where did we send out kids to school, and had we ever even visited Israel?

It's been 20 years since the Soviet Union went out of business, and we packed up our protest signs. Russian conversation on the New York subway and on the streets of Israel is now a norm. American Jews are largely unafraid to speak out on issues of concern. Just about each week, I meet someone who reminds me of his or her time in the movement and how it focused their Jewish lives and priorities for the better.

From his prison cell, Natan Sharansky wrote to his wife Avital about the communion of their souls. I'd like to think we achieved something of this between large numbers of Soviet and free world Jews.

A couple of Shabbatot ago in my shul, a wonderful boy, Moshe, was bar mitzvaed. The rabbi pointed out that his mother, Irina, who came from a refusenik family, has been able to turn her Jewish identity, which was a curse, into a blessing. I deeply believe that God granted our generation the witnessing of the miraculous redemption of Soviet Jewry to challenge us to be better Jews in thought and deed. It's an offer we dare not refuse.